

## At the Beginning: Rare 1940s Color Photographs of Big Bend



Road to the Basin, Casa Grande in the distance.



Yucca in bloom with the Chisos Mountains in the background.

Natt Dodge, a park service biologist, visited the Big Bend a number of times between 1944 and 1949. Knowledgeable in the plants and animals of the southwest, Dodge was also considered to be “a competent man with a camera.”

These color images, taken by Natt Dodge, provide a rare glimpse into the appearance and condition of Big Bend in the first years of its existence as a National Park.

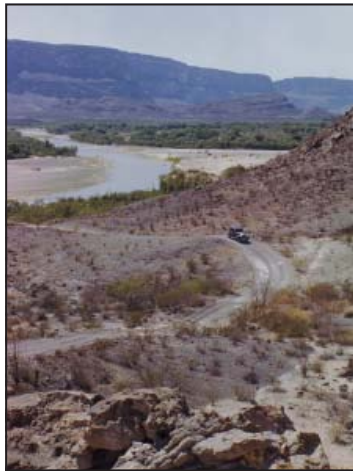
All photographs by Natt N. Dodge. Courtesy the National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection.



Rio Grande just above Daniel's Ranch



Century Plant at the mouth of Green Gulch.



River View Below Castolon



Mouth of Santa Elena Canyon.



Riders on horseback descend into the basin from Laguna Meadow.



View from the South Rim, looking south toward the Rio Grande.

## From Private Land to Public Park

Ranger Doug Thompson

The creation of Big Bend National Park in 1944 culminated a period of land acquisition that began almost ten years earlier. In 1935, the United States Congress passed legislation authorizing the park's creation, with the understanding that the state of Texas would purchase all of the private land required and then donate it, along with additional state land, to the National Park Service.

Landowners throughout the region had mixed feelings. Some were pleased to know that their property would benefit millions of future park visitors, while others were bitterly disappointed that their life's work was being taken from them. Once the acquisition began, some owners also felt that they were not offered adequate compensation for their land. Others, however, felt that they had been treated fairly and equitably. The state of Texas eventually allocated \$1,500,000 for the acquisition program.

Gradually, the families who lived within the proposed park boundaries began to relinquish their land and move away. Some went to nearby communities, such as Alpine and Presidio, where they began life anew, while others left the Big Bend region. With time, the park began to take shape, and on June 12, 1944, it became a part of the National Park System.

The last person to sell his Big Bend property was Wayne Cartledge of Castolon. Feeling that the government's appraisal of his holdings was too low, he refused to give up his title until 1957, thirteen years after Big Bend National Park had been formally established. By 1961, he had relocated from Castolon to Presidio County.

Since then, the federal government has on occasion acquired private holdings for the park. The Harte Ranch (North Rosillos) became part of the park in 1989. The Fay Ranch, a 10,000 acre inholding near Persimmon Gap, was purchased in 1994. These acquisitions have increased the park's size to 801,163 acres. Today, Big Bend National Park is a magnificent tribute, not just to those who championed its creation, but to those who gave their land to make it a reality.